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Tuskegee Airmen and Moton Field

Creating a National Park

Col. B.O. Davis, Jr., in Italy in 1944. This Tuskegee Airman received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his valor in combat.

On July 14, 1998, United States Representative Bob Riley (3rd District, Alabama) introduced legislation to establish the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site at Moton Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, to commemorate the role of the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II. Nicknamed the “Lonely Eagles,” the Tuskegee Airmen overcame the “separate but equal” conditions sanctioned by the army to become one of the most highly respected and honored fighter groups of the war. The men of the 99th Fighter Squadron and 332nd Fighter Group completed 1,578 missions, destroyed over 260 enemy aircraft, sank one enemy destroyer, and demolished numerous enemy installations. More importantly, they never lost a bomber to enemy fighters while escorting bombing missions. Although the Tuskegee Airmen collectively received 95 Distinguished Flying Crosses, as well as Legions of Merit, Silver States, Purple Hearts, the Croix De Guerre, and the Red Star of Yugoslavia, their combat exploits remained virtually unknown to most Americans. Nonetheless, after decades of obscurity and neglect, Congress is finally considering a bill which would recognize the important contributions of these men and women to the war effort and their effect on the modern civil rights movement. If this act is passed, the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site will be the only site in the national park system dedicated to the role of African Americans in World War II.

Ten months before the introduction of this bill, Dr. Benjamin F. Payton, President of Tuskegee University, and Congressman Riley requested that the National Park Service study how best to interpret and celebrate the role of the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II and their initial training at Moton Field. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) provided a \$75,000 grant for the printing, travel, and bulk of the salary cost for NPS personnel. The Southeast Regional Office then created a study team to complete a special resource study, which is the first step in the NPS planning process to evaluate a proposed addition to the system. The special resource study was



to consider the potential of adding Moton Field to the National Park System to commemorate the Tuskegee Airmen and determine if the area resources are nationally significant and would make a suitable and feasible addition to the system.

Shortly after Congressman Riley's and Dr. Payton's request, the study team began the project with a reconnaissance survey to collect basic information on the Tuskegee Airmen and Moton Field, the site of primary flight training for the airmen. The team historians consulted various primary and secondary sources such as military records, newspapers, photographs, documentaries, books, and film footage, and gathered additional information from the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, Tuskegee University archives, and the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. To further their understanding of the Tuskegee Airmen and their experience, the NPS study team also conducted a workshop with several of the airmen at the Mighty Eighth Air Force Heritage Museum near Savannah, Georgia, and sent many of them a questionnaire asking for their input and insight into this project.

Historic Background

When studying the role of the Tuskegee Airmen and African Americans in World War II, it is important to understand the history of African

Americans in the military. African-American men and women have continually played a significant role in the United States military and its colonial predecessors. They not only fought to enter the armed forces, but when finally accepted by the government, they had to work under segregated and unequal conditions and prove their abilities. Although the Civil War offered many African-Americans an opportunity to fight for freedom and equality, black soldiers still encountered blatant racism, discrimination, and segregation. Nonetheless, many African Americans continued to fight in America's wars with the hope that they could achieve freedom, equality, and respect. This racism, discrimination, and segregation continued in the military and in society well until the 20th century. For example, while two million African Americans responded to the call to fight in World War I, the military accepted only 400,000 black recruits and assigned many of them to non-combatant roles and menial tasks. The Marine Corps and Army Air Corps simply banned African Americans altogether by claiming that they lacked the qualifications for combat duty. After the war, the armed forces used the 1925 War College Study regarding the use of black troops as an excuse to deny African Americans positions of leadership and skill in the military, and continued to reduce the number of existing black units. The Army Air Corps and the Marine Corps remained closed to African Americans while the Coast Guard admitted only a few men to low-level positions. The struggle of African Americans to join the Air Corps and become combat pilots during World War II played out against this background of official discrimination.

After much pressure from the black press and civil rights groups such as the NAACP, the Army Air Corps finally decided to establish a segregated, all-black pursuit squadron based in Tuskegee, Alabama. Tuskegee Institute received a contract from the military to provide primary flight training,

while the army built a separate air base, Tuskegee Army Air Field, for advanced training. Technical training for the support personnel was completed at Chanute Field in Illinois. After receiving financing from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, Tuskegee Institute built Moton Field between 1940 and 1942 to house the flight school operations. The school selected African-American contractors to design and build the facility, while skilled workers and students from Tuskegee helped complete the field, which was dedicated in 1943 in honor of Robert Russa Moton, the second president of Tuskegee Institute. When the air field was finally completed, it included a grass airstrip, two hangars for aircraft, a control tower, a locker building, a club house, several wood buildings for offices and supplies, a few brick structures for storage, and an area for vehicles and their maintenance.

On July 19, 1941, twelve aviation cadets and one student officer, Captain Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., reported to Tuskegee Institute to begin flight training as the first class of African-American pilot candidates in the U.S. military. By November, only six of these cadets had demonstrated the necessary skills, passed the training course, and were transferred to Tuskegee Army Air Field to complete their pilot training with the Army Air Corps (Army Air Forces). On March 7, 1942, the first class of African-American aviation cadets graduated from Tuskegee Army Air Field and became the nation's first black military pilots. The significance of this event should not be underestimated—after years of struggle, African Americans were finally accepted and commissioned as pilots and officers in the United States Army. The successful training of these pilots at Tuskegee, coupled with the United States' entry into World War II, led the military to expand its African-American aviation program. Consequently, the Army Air Forces established another African-American unit, the 332nd Fighter Group, and began plans for a segregated medium bomber group known as the 477th Bombardment Group.

Based on their research, the study team determined that the importance of the Tuskegee Airmen not only deals with their primary training at Moton Field and their courage in battle during World War II, but also embraces the struggle to end racial discrimination and segregation in the U.S. military and in American society. Members of the 477th Bombardment Group, frustrated with their "separate but equal" training, staged an important non-violent demonstration to desegregate an officer's club and helped set the pattern for protests later popularized in the modern civil rights movement. The airmen also include the thousands of African-American men and women in civilian and military support groups, whose dedication and

Moton Field during World War II.



heroism helped pave the way for President Harry S Truman's executive order to desegregate the military on July 26, 1948. In addition, the significance of the Tuskegee Airmen encompasses the history and development of Tuskegee Institute and its efforts to establish a military flight training program for African Americans at Moton Field, despite the resistance of many who believed that African Americans lacked the skills and intelligence to learn to fly. These accomplishments are nationally significant and worthy of commemoration, and the study team considered the remaining resources at Moton Field the appropriate place to establish such a historic site.

Since the study team determined that Moton Field and its link to the Tuskegee Airmen was nationally significant and had potential as a unit of the national park system, a detailed study of possible management alternatives for the site was then conducted. Private individuals and representatives from the National Park Service, the State of Alabama, the City of Tuskegee, and Tuskegee University attended an "Alternatives Planning Meeting" in Montgomery, Alabama, to discuss the possibility of a National Park Service unit at Moton Field and its impact on the surrounding community. Based on the study's research and the information gathered at this meeting, as well as the responses from the Tuskegee Airmen questionnaire and workshop, the study team prepared five alternatives for the development of the Moton Field Site.

Alternative A—Commemoration/Information:
Moton Field

Alternative B—Commemoration/Interpretation:
Tuskegee Airmen & Moton Field

Alternative C—Living History: The Tuskegee
Airmen Experience

Alternative D—Tuskegee Airmen National
Center: A Historical Continuum
No Action

After completing a draft of the special resource study, the study team held several infor-

mation meetings to begin the public review process and assess the level of support for the project alternatives. From the participants' input and responses, alternatives C and D gained the most support, including that of several airmen, Congressman Riley, the City of Tuskegee, the State of Alabama, Tuskegee University, and other individuals. After his briefing, Congressman Riley decided to move forward with legislation as quickly as possible, especially since the number of remaining Tuskegee Airmen is dwindling and the resources at Moton Field are deteriorating. His office then asked the park service to help them draft legislation to establish the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site based on alternatives C and D. After many discussions between the National Park Service, Tuskegee University President Benjamin Payton, and Congressman Riley's office, legislation was introduced in the House of Representatives on July 14, 1998. However, both Congress and the President must approve the bill before the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site can be established. If Moton Field is designated as a new unit of the national park system, the Service will develop a comprehensive management plan in cooperation with the Tuskegee Airmen, Tuskegee University, other organizations, and state and local officials. Hopefully, this will occur soon so the remaining airmen can see their legacy honored at the proposed historic site.

Christine Trebellas is a historian in the Southeast Support Office of the National Park Service and worked on the Moton Field/Tuskegee Airmen Special Resource Study with Barbara Tagger (Historian, NPS) and Rick McCollough (Project Manager, NPS).

Photos courtesy NPS, Southeast Regional Office.

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Left, hanger #1 at Moton Field during World War II.
Right, hanger #1 at Moton Field in 1997.

